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MUSIC REVIEWS

MUDHONEY
Piece of Cake (Sire/Reprise)

Forget wah-wah pedals, distortion, feedback, fuzz — hell, forget guitars. Mudhoney's secret weapon has always been Mark Arm's voice, a half-querulous, faux-macho howl that powered Mudhoney's lyrical conflations of sex, death and desperation like a filthy but potent engine. His tag used to be holding the final note of a phrase forever — "You just wait till your father gets hoooooo-oooooooooo-oooooooooo-mmmmme!" — an old but effective trick he'd use on just about every song. Arm's was a voice that perfectly evoked the spiritual morass that Mudhoney groped with/wallowed in, conjuring crassness, arrogance and terror in equal proportions. And for cut-to-the-chase lyrics ("Fuck me, I'm sick", "Let me out, Let me in/I'm losin' myself again"), it's hard to top the 'honey boys.

Mudhoney's 1991 offering, *Every Good Boy Deserves Fudge*, seemed lackluster, primarily because Arm's vocals were submerged in the mix, like he was just the singer, and not the soul, of Mudhoney. The group's latest effort, *Piece of Cake*, restores the balance somewhat, with Arm wrapping his lungs around a handful of killer songs and an equal number of mediocre ones.

Coming so soon after the L.A. riots, "When in Rome" could be construed as Mudhoney's first political statement. "We were sleeping while the city burned," sings Arm (though I'll bet they were fiddling with wah-wah pedals). Swamped with cheesy/dramatic organ, "Rome" is certainly as double-edged an apathy anthem as we've had all year, a simultaneous warning and rallying cry to slackers everywhere.

Like the absurdly passive narrators strewn throughout occult writer H.P. Lovecraft's fiction, the protagonists of Mudhoney's songs are often hapless fatalists awaiting certain doom: the guy in "Blinding Sun" takes a nap by a riverbank and wakes up with a noose around his neck; the aeronautically obsessed psycho/acidhead of "Thirteenth Floor" keeps edging closer and closer to that open window; the antihero of "Ritzville" repeatedly asserts that he's headed back to that town because "it's as good a place as any to go and die."

In Mudhoney's world, redemption is a long shot, and the possibility that love will save the day seems dubious. They're not quite misogynists, but they're cynical enough to approach romance offensively. "I can't breathe till I suck you dry" is Arm's gut reaction to a schoolboy crush, and he's not talking about cunnilingus. The hurt-or-be-hurt hardass pose dates back at least to the Stones' "Heart of Stone," but Mudhoney are no pouting pretty-boy studs, just negative creeps with needs they're sure won't be met. Making the best of a bad situation — real life — Mudhoney crank the amps to 11 and shout at the devil. Listen up. (Tom Sinclair)

PERFORMANCE

BIKINI KILL, MUDWIMMIN
UCLA, September 30

When Bikini Kill rolled into town last week, many fans and those curious to learn more about the lead Riot Grrrls missed a rare chance to see them perform. The only show in Los Angeles for this Olympia, Washington, band (now based in Washington, D.C.) was a free, unadvertised gig at the Cooperage, UCLA's student café. Maybe Bikini Kill thought the secrecy would save them for the in-crowd, but by the end of the night the band's political message was lost on the mostly college-age audience lucky enough to have heard about the show.

San Francisco's Mudwimmin kicked off the evening with a sloppy-ass set only a mother could love. With wacky outfits and face paint, they screamed over sludgy, droning tunes, switching instruments almost every song. Things picked up after the lively "Do the Bitch Twitch," but then sank down to new lows with stupid comments like "My butt itches."

"Headin' down over to the fraternity now?" asked Bikini Kill's singer, Kathleen Hanna, in a peppy prep-school voice, finishing the question with a nasty "fuckers." Bikini Kill then banged out speedy hardcore/pop songs with a clean, moving beat that at one point resembled the Bay City Rollers' "Saturday Night" (and that's good). "STAR FUCKER" was scrawled on the drummer's round belly; Hanna had "SLUT" penned down one arm and something smeared beyond recognition down the other. The bass player, who sometimes played guitar when the guitarist was playing drums so the drummer could sing (and the singer could play bass — keeping track?) kept a huge wad of Bubble Yum crackin' to the beat and blew an occasional bubble between numbers. Hanna danced a hopped-up mutated version of the twist, then lapsed into beat-smart fits of shaking — one of the many elements that proved this band never once boring.

In between numbers Hanna also gave helpful advice: "What I do when guys yell 'Hey baby' on the street is go home with them and fuck them. So keep on doin' it 'cause it really works." She smiled sarcastically with a big thumbs up. Hanna then did her best prom-queen wave before diving into a song about date rape.

Hanna then told a story to the collegiate, supposedly clued-in crowd: "Did you read about that guy who raped a girl at Claremont College and how they let the guy back in school 'cause [the rape] wasn't that important?" The audience stood there mute, like it was a trick question. Finally someone asked, "Why are you telling us this?"

"Why?" Hanna looked astonished. "'Cause I have to deal with it every day, every hour of my life." The acne-prone crowd remained disappointingly blank. If this is any clue about what to expect from the MTV generation, then don't get too hopeful. (Lorraine Ali)

GREAT POP THINGS → BABES IN TOYLAND MEET THE GRAPPIPODS OF EMPIRE 6

BY COLIN B. MORTON & CHUCK DEATH

Sweet and Low

Bob Mould's contentment

BY ROBERT GORDON

Bob Mould's new trio, Sugar, begs for comparisons to his old one, Hüsker Dü. Though *Copper Blue* may be a return to form — away from his more studied pair of solo albums and back to the wall-of-guitar punkish force on which he made his reputation — I sense a fundamental difference. Craft replaces the anger of yore, probably a result of age and success.

***Copper Blue* is confusing. The initial guitar burst chugs like a slam dancer's pit and seems to be a stylistic announcement. Yet after pumping up the pressure in the first verse, we don't get the anticipated tumbling barrage of release. I can't expect Bob to stay angry all his life, but I feel at least a twinge of disappointment to hear what promises the Hüskers but then delivers something else. Sugar smells different than it tastes.**

After repeated plays, *Copper Blue* has become quite enjoyable, though it has yet to touch me. The truncated pause between cuts gives the album an urgency, however artificial. The bass intro and whining guitar on "Changes" recall the better elements — edginess, angularity — of the Pixies. "The Slim" has one of those power drones that Mould does so well; he contrasts it about halfway through with a swampy guitar rising out of nowhere. "If I Can't Change Your Mind" is as solid an acoustic cut as any he's done.

Not all of the writing is by any means heady, and he's certainly a guy who's earned a break; "Man on the Moon" is a humble little bedtime song. Mould pushes himself lyrically in new directions — "A Good Idea" is a gothic tale of love and death, evoking an Appalachian ballad in spirit; parts of "The Slim," notably the second verse, are cubist in style, with words and phrases repeated in chunks, like a portrait in which the various perspectives are presented as one.

***Copper Blue* is eminently listenable; it just lacks emotional force. Oddly, the track that has stayed with me the most is "Hoover Dam," certainly one of the catchiest on the album, and one that features a perverse art-rock keyboard/synth solo. I cringe, but some part of me kind of likes it. If more of this album hit me that way, I'd probably feel stronger about it. I'm hoping some kind of impact may come with time. Right now, if it's nothing more than enjoyable, that's better than most entries in the entertainment industry.**

Richard Grossman, 1937 -1992

In an even semi-ideal universe, Richard Grossman, who died last week of cancer, would at some point in his 54 years have received at least a down payment on the recognition he deserved as a true monster of the jazz keyboard, a player and innovator on a par with Cecil Taylor, Borah Bergman and nobody — really — contemporary else. As with '50s piano giant Herbie Nichols, with whom he shared both the refusal to compromise his artistry and a Buddha-like professional forbearance, it would be easy to say he died unsung, but in his last decade Grossman accomplished much, even most, of what he set out musically to do.

In its final form, his music was totally spontaneous, totally unpremeditated — "free" — free from chord changes, from explicit, even implicit, time signatures, from easy reliance on riffs, licks and all such habitual et cetera — free as relatively few improvisors, even in Free Jazz per se, have actually played it. Coltrane, for instance, for all his courage and genius, rarely if ever played this quantitatively (or qualitatively) free. (I once asked drummer Alex Cline what sort of tempos had been used on a record he'd just made with Richard. "Tempos? *No* tempos." "Yeah, but was it fast-no-tempo or slow-no-tempo?" He just shrugged.) Perhaps most tellingly, Grossman's was never a bludgeoning free music — a run-away freight train, a continuously brandished weapon. With silence as nearly half the equation, and its unit occurrence so varied in context and duration as to have its own distinct temperature and flavor, tensions of a purely sonic order would emerge, shift, be resolved and/or ignored in collusion with parallel existential tensions rising/falling to accentuate the music's intimacy with its own non-being.

BRIAN CROSS

Originally from Philadelphia, where he played with people like Lee Morgan, Odean Pope and Jimmy Garrison, Grossman moved to L.A. in 1978. He cut a solo LP in '82 and by mid-decade was collaborating with such fellow travelers as drummer and bassist Ken Filiano, with whom he formed an amazing, and amazingly egalitarian, trio, and reedmen Vinny Golia, Lynn Johnston and John Carter. A total of four albums, including *Trio in Real Time* (one of the great trio records, all time, and we're talking Cecil, Monk, Bud Powell, you name 'em), documents this fruitful period.

Such stuff may not be "for everyone" — player, listener — it doesn't have to be. But in an era when shameless parrots (the Marsalises), appealing if tasteless reshufflers (Geri Allen, Marcus Roberts) and former firebreathers playing it safe on the dotted line (Charlie Haden, David Murray) are the basic face of jazz to the world, jazz *needs* men/women willing to revisit the fount, to unwaveringly man the frontier — to be way the heck Out There — and Richard Grossman was out there. May his legacy enrich and nurture us all. (Richard Meltzer)

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